

Subject: Youth Soccer Insider: Refing in foreign languages: Even a few words can make a difference

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Refing in foreign languages: Even a few words can make a difference

By Randy Vogt

Unfortunately, English is the only language that I speak fluently. Immigration from Spanish-speaking countries has grown rapidly and many of these families play soccer. So I was confronted with the prospect of refereeing players, sometimes two whole teams, who communicated with one another in Spanish and sometimes dissented in Spanish, realizing that I did not know most of what they were saying.

But I have watched games in Spanish my whole life and picked up a small part of the terminology so I started using the terms on the field. Players then stopped dissenting in Spanish, fearful that I could understand them.

I studied French for eight years and Italian for five years. As my friends who come from those countries will tell you, I don't speak those languages fluently yet try very hard.

I've had the good fortune to referee in Brazil (1987), the Soviet Union (1991) and Italy (1992 and 1994). For Brazil, I had several weeks to prepare so I learned some basic Portuguese, including some of the soccer words.

For the USSR, I had a whole year to prepare so I listened to Russian tapes. I was invited to ref in Moscow and asked one of my Russian immigrant friends to translate the words that I would say on the field. I felt rather confident that I would be able to get by OK.

My first game, I was refereeing two Russian boys U-12 teams and we obviously had the coin toss before the game. I had forgotten to get those words translated. So I pointed to one side of my Russian



kopec, then pointed to the blue captain, then pointed to the other side of the kopec while pointing to the white captain. After flipping the coin, I pointed to the captain who won. He said something in Russian, then the other captain said something, both teams cheered in Russian and we started the game. I don't know if they lined up correctly as I did not know back then to have the captain physically stand on the side of the field he would be defending after the coin toss. Lesson learned.

There were two Italian teams playing in this tournament, Liberty Cup Moscow, and there was some confusion when the ref assignor gave me my instructions for the day in Russian. So I had the assignor, who spoke Armenian and Russian, tell a translator who spoke Russian and Italian, to give me the instructions in Italian. Strange as it might seem, when I was in what was the Soviet Union, I received my marching orders in Italian.

As I can hold a conversation in Italian, I was more comfortable speaking in that country's native tongue when I twice refereed in Italy a generation ago. Officiating in Torino, near the French border, I refereed a boys U-18 game between an Italian team and a French team. As often happens, I wound up speaking French to the Italian players and Italian to the French players.

Back home in the United States, speaking other languages as a ref is helpful. I certainly remember a Long Island Junior Soccer League boys U-14 game a decade ago. The ref is to contact the home coach before the game to confirm date, time and field. I phoned coach Aldo and said, "This is Randy Vogt and I am refereeing your boys under-14 game. Please let me know the day, time and field."

It was a really hot and humid day. When I got there, I found out that it was their last game of the season and Aldo's team needed to win to take the division championship and they were playing the last-place team. Back in those days, I refereed boys U-14 games by myself. Midway through the first half, I whistled Aldo's team for offside and I was in a relatively good position to judge it as I was two yards from the second-to-last defender. Aldo yelled to his son, "*L'arbitro ha sbagliato. Non stavi in fuorigioco.*" Which means "The ref made a mistake. You were not offside."

Aldo obviously did not know that Randy Vogt is actually 25% Italian-American and has refereed in Italy. So I waited, waited and waited until the ball went over the touchline by Aldo and said to him, "*Tuo figlio era in fuorigioco e io capisco l'italiano.*" ("Your son was offside and I understand Italian.")

Aldo kept quiet the rest of the game, in any language, and then started following the career of his new Italian-American friend.

([Randy Vogt](#) has officiated over 9,000 games during the past three decades, from professional matches in front of thousands to 6-year-olds being cheered on by very enthusiastic parents. In [Preventive Officiating](#), he shares his wisdom gleaned from thousands of games and hundreds of clinics to help referees not only survive but thrive on the soccer field. You can visit the book's website at <http://www.preventiveofficiating.com/>)

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